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Custer Revisited

By

Eric E. Eibe, Major, USAF

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Advisor: Dr. Michael E. Weaver

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

March 2010

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Abstract

One hundred and thirty-three years ago 268 soldiers of the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, were annihilated by several thousand Indians on the banks of the Little Bighorn River. Unlike battles such as Midway, Gettysburg, and Yorktown which are typically scrutinized for their impact on the outcome of their respective conflict, the Battle of the Little Bighorn is unique in that it tends to be examined not for its impact on the events of its time, but for the motives and actions of its central figure, George A. Custer. Most will agree that he was a capable military commander, but it is difficult to find consensus amongst amateur or professional scholars as to whether he acted rationally during his final days. How was it that the youngest General of the Civil War could lead his men into such a disaster? Was it reckless ambition driven by ego and thus a desire for personal glory, or was it the result of a hastily prepared and poorly executed battle plan?

The answers to these questions will never be known and will therefore continue be hotly debated for many years to come. The following analysis of the battle, and of the man himself, will be yet another contribution to the age old argument. The facts of the battle and of the events which shaped Custer's life support the conclusion that it was not reckless ambition which compelled his actions at his final battle. Instead, his defeat was largely a result of a battle plan based on contradictory intelligence regarding Indian force size. Once the plan was executed the failure of a subordinate to competently command and control his forces in the face of resistance contributed significantly to Custer's defeat. Custer's attack was executed under proper authority, with proven tactics and sufficient manpower based on the initial intelligence provided. Though supremely confident in his abilities and that of his command, it was not ego that doomed Custer's men.

The Indian Wars of the late 1800's are a frequently overlooked chapter of American history. This is easy to understand considering the magnitude of the conflicts which occurred less than a century prior. The War of 1812, the Texas Revolution, and the Civil War dominated the pages of American history of the 19th century and may have overshadowed the conflict against the American Indians had it not been for one man: George Armstrong Custer. The exploits and reputation of the youngest General in the history of the U.S. Army provides an enormous amount of circumstantial evidence regarding the actions of a man, that despite being victorious in over 20 cavalry engagements, led over 280 souls to their deaths on the far away plains of Montana in 1876. Custer is often portrayed as being a reckless and ego driven man who departed from logic when he split his forces and attacked what is often described as the largest concentration of Indians ever assembled on the North American continent. Most historians seem to focus on the assumed ulterior motives of Custer while few attack the debate from a tactical point of view. It is the latter of the two that I think provide a more accurate reason as to why Custer failed in his attack at the Little Bighorn.

Custer's reputation for recklessness and ego-driven ambition has its roots in his days during the Civil War. Upon graduation from West Point, newly commissioned Lieutenant Custer served mostly as a staff officer at the onset of the war. Like most young officers he appeared eager to make a name for himself. During the battle of Williamsburg, Custer took the opportunity to surge ahead of a Union bayonet charge, threw himself into the thick of battle and, "Before any help could reach him, he captured a Captain, five men, and a battle flag, the first Rebel standard ever taken by the Army of the Potomac."¹ Shortly thereafter, accompanying a Union General and his staff whom were openly perplexed regarding the depth of a river that needed to be crossed, Custer fearlessly strode forward into the middle of it to proudly demonstrate firsthand just how deep it actually was. These acts are merely two examples of his bravery, but more importantly it demonstrates his ability to observe, orient, decide, and act quicker than the enemy and even some of his superior officers. Those abilities did not go unnoticed. One of General Wesley Merritt's staff members is quoted as saying, "He was

certainly the model of a light Cavalry officer, quick in observation, clear in judgment and resolute and determined in execution.”² Additionally, it was General McClellan that said, “In those days, Custer was simply a reckless, gallant boy, undeterred by fatigue, unconscious of fear; but his head was always clear in danger and he always brought me clear and intelligible reports of what he saw under the heaviest of fire. I became much attached to him.”³ Considering the fact that McClellan was relieved of command of the Army of the Potomac due to his own lack of aggressiveness in prosecuting the war, it is possible that he subconsciously admired Custer for qualities that he himself did not have.

Custer’s exploits in the Civil War garnered him many admirers, but also many critics. At the age of only 23, Custer became the youngest General in the history of the U.S. Army when he received a temporary promotion to Brigadier General. Though well deserved, this rapid rise in rank disturbed those that considered themselves more experienced and more senior officers. The Army’s youngest General was soon labeled by a Union Army Captain as a ‘popinjay’, this ‘affected dandy,’ with his ‘girls hair,’ his ‘swagger,’ and ‘West Point conceit’ put ‘over men’.”⁴ Such comments can be quickly dismissed as jealousy and therefore labeled irrelevant due to obvious biasness; however, accusations of recklessness later made by a President hold considerably more credibility in the eyes of its readers.

After the Civil War, Custer was stationed at various frontier forts, leading various expeditions against the interest of the native Indians. His time at these forts provided him insight into the business dealings of some of its occupants, namely the government appointed traders who were supposed to supply the numerous reservation based Indians with government issued food and supplies. Custer’s knowledge of unfair trading practices and outright dishonesty of the government appointed traders would come to light through his testimony at a Congressional hearing on the matter, testimony which served to embarrass and infuriate the Grant administration.⁵ The repercussions for Custer would come swiftly.

An expedition into Montana was planned for early 1876 to force a large contingent of plains Indians back onto their reservations. Custer was originally designated to command one of the three columns; however, President Grant quickly relieved him of that responsibility following Custer's damaging testimony. It was only through the efforts of his former commanding officer, General Sheridan, that he was at least able to regain his participation in the expedition under the direct supervision of another officer. Had that favor not been called in Custer would not have participated in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, and thus may have fallen into historical obscurity. But, he did participate with disastrous results. Custer's negative reputation was perpetuated by an administration which was eager to divert responsibility for a large scale military disaster occurring during an election year. The post-battle report by the Grant administration solidified Custer's image when it claimed that the battle's outcome was a result of Custer's "rashness and recklessness."⁶

Grant's characterization of Custer's actions during his final battle is ill deserved. Aggressiveness in battle and fearlessness in the face of the enemy can easily be twisted and characterized as rash and reckless by those who lack the same attributes (McClellan) or those who are trying to shift blame (Grant). Blind aggression, which is taking quick action with little to no thought of the enemy's size, disposition, or reaction, can result in disaster, much like Custer's very first engagement as a newly appointed General in the Civil War. Thinking he faced only a company or two of Confederates, he charged their lines with 60 men only to run headlong into a force of 600.⁷ This indeed was a fine example of recklessness resulting from youth and inexperience. Having a horse shot out from under him, nearly having his own brains blown out, and losing half his command had a profound impact on him. As a result, Custer's preparations for the next day's fight stand in stark contrast to those intent on characterizing him as oblivious to the odds. Gregory Urwin, author of *Custer Victorious*, describes how the day's events influenced Custer's subsequent actions: "The previous days fighting had taken away some of his cockiness and convinced him of the value of knowing the odds one faced. As soon as his men were settled, Custer sent scouting parties out to the

front, right, and rear. He would not go into battle blind this day!”⁸ It would take over 20 cavalry engagements in the Civil War, and a handful more fighting the Indians, to further refine his battlefield tactics.

Given that he was victorious in every single Civil War engagement he was in, with the exception of his first in command as a General, it is clear that he had the ability and willingness to learn from and not repeat past mistakes. This ability to learn from a single and somewhat minor failure would reverberate throughout the remainder of the war and undoubtedly contributed to the overall defeat of Confederate forces. In fact, upon the Confederacy’s surrender by Robert E. Lee, Union General Philip Sheridan, purchased the small table upon which the surrender documents had been signed and in a note presenting the table to Custer’s wife wrote, "I respectfully present to you the small writing table on which the conditions for surrender of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was written by Lt. General Grant — and permit me to say Madam, that there was scarcely an individual in our service who has contributed more to bring about this desirable result than your very gallant husband."⁹

Considering that Custer was victorious in 22 out of 23 Civil War engagements, became the youngest General in U.S. history as a result of those successes, was regarded as a principal architect for the defeat of the Confederacy, and later labeled as rash and reckless by a biased President concerned more with his own reputation, provides enough evidence to warrant entertaining the idea that maybe it wasn’t Custer’s ego that got him and his men killed. Despite the lack of any survivors of Custer’s last stand it is indisputable that poor tactical decisions made in the hours leading up to the attack were the main cause of Custer’s defeat.

Custer’s defeat can be primarily attributed to two factors: inadequate knowledge of enemy strength and disposition, and poor leadership by his subordinate Major Marcus Reno. The overall campaign plan to subdue the plains Indians consisted of three different columns of forces converging around the southern territories of Montana. One column of 925 men led by General Terry, of which

Custer and the 7th Cavalry Regiment were attached to, rode west out of Fort Abraham Lincoln located to the east in the Dakota Territory, while Colonel Gibbon's column of 450 soldiers maneuvered east out of western Montana. An additional force of 1000 under the command of General Crook would move north out of Wyoming. The combined force of over 2000 soldiers should have been more than sufficient to deal with an enemy thought to be half that size. It was one of Custer's own men who later confirmed the estimate: "There seems little question but that when Terry and Custer left Fort Lincoln it was supposed there were not more than 800 hostile warriors who might be considered on the war path."¹⁰ Though the exact location of the enemy was unknown, the three columns were intended to block any avenues of escape and thus trap any hostile forces in the area in a classic pincer movement.

It was General Terry's column that first encountered signs of recent Indian encampments in the area. By following the various trails they were able to at least ascertain an approximate direction and distance of the main Indian camp.¹¹ Shortly thereafter, General Terry split off Custer's 7th Cavalry Regiment with orders to follow the Indian trail in order to preclude the possibility of escape. More importantly these orders contained a caveat which allowed Custer freedom of action based on the developing situation.¹² It was this degree of latitude, coupled with the thought that only 800 warriors were in the area, which probably emboldened Custer's later decisions.

Riding at least 40 miles in advance of the remainder of the Terry column, Custer's scouts followed the Indian trail into the valley of the Little Bighorn River. What lay before them was a three mile long camp consisting of hundreds of lodges and deemed by his own Indian scouts to be too big for Custer's force to handle.¹³ However, earlier experience's taught him that the opinions of his own Indian scouts were not always accurate. Eight years prior in the hours leading up to his attack on an Indian village located along the Washita River, Custer's Osage scouts told him that the force he was about to face outnumbered his own and that defeat was likely.¹⁴ After splitting his forces in four¹⁵, he attacked the sleeping village and killed 103 Indians.¹⁶ Undeterred by his scout's

assessment of the Little Bighorn encampment, Custer quickly decided upon a battle plan designed to surprise the enemy and sow confusion within their ranks while preventing escape. The only difference between his current battle plan and that of eight years prior was that back then he saw with his own eyes the size and location of the village prior to his actual attack. Even when Custer himself went to verify his scout's estimates on the morning of 25 June, "he saw nothing through his field glasses, and he openly doubted the presence of a large camp."¹⁷ He knew there were Indians encampments in the Little Bighorn valley but did not know exactly where or how many.

Shortly after Custer's recon of the valley he divided his command of approximately 650 men into four groups and then proceeded in a movement-to-contact type of approach. Captain Frederick Benteen was to depart with 120 men in a reconnaissance of the south-east side of the valley with orders to 'pitch into anything he encountered'.¹⁸ The bulk of the force under Custer stayed together until they spotted a band of approximately 100 Indians fleeing towards the valley. At this time, 175 men under the command of Major Marcus Reno split off from the main body to pursue and attack the fleeing band. Custer and a force of 221 men would ride parallel to the river with their movements being masked behind a line of bluffs. The forth group consisted of 175 men designated to guard the slow moving pack-train. Still unaware of the size of the Indian village which lay before him, Custer's tactic of dividing his forces still fell in line with his overall strategy. The book, *Campaign Series, Little Bighorn 1876*, summarizes Custer's strategy as, "Custer's mission was to force the warriors to return to the reservations. His most effective method of achieving this was to destroy their homes and property, or capture the non-combatants and hold them hostage. The non-combatants were the primary targets. Lt Godfrey understood Custer's expected strategy as: '...attack on the families and the capture of the pony herds were in that event counted upon to strike consternation into the hearts of the warriors, and were elements for success'."¹⁹

Major Reno pursued the fleeing Indians straight into their main camp. Organizing his men into battle formation he charged. The Indians knew Custer's men were somewhere in the area but

were unaware of their close proximity to their village. When Reno's men appeared, "The appearance of the soldiers column through the immense camp into turmoil. Custer had achieved a general surprise."²⁰ Reno began to press his attack but upon meeting resistance, dismounted his troops to form a skirmish line. Fearing that he would be encircled he ordered a chaotic retreat across the river and up into the relative safety of the surrounding bluffs. Eye witness accounts from survivors of Reno's command claim that Reno quickly lost control of the situation and ordered a mount and dismount three times in rapid succession.²¹ Had he maintained control of the situation, not dismounted, and pressed the attack into the village, Custer's later 'last stand' may never have become a reality. Even his Indian adversaries recognized the opportunity that Reno had. In 1883 a Sioux woman, disgusted by the conduct of Reno's command, said that, "He had the camp at his mercy, and he could have killed us all or driven us away..."²² Instead, he panicked and withdrew.

Having caught sight of Reno's attack on the camp from the bluffs above, Custer sent word for Captain Benteen to come to his support as he marched parallel to the river in the hopes of attacking the disarrayed village from the opposite side. Unbeknown to Custer, Benteen had already ceased his earlier reconnaissance, withdrew, and soon encountered Reno's retreating command. Electing to help defend and consolidate Reno's position against sporadic attack, Benteen did not come to the immediate aid of Custer. Upon resupply from the newly arrived pack train, Benteen and another subordinate of Custer, Captain Wier, made an effort to come to Custer's aid in response to his earlier request. Unable to reach Custer's location and in an indefensible position themselves, they retreated back to their previous location.

Not much is known about Custer's last moments. Reported eye-witness accounts of some of the Indians who claim to have participated in the battle often vary widely with regards to Custer's final actions. What is known is that the bulk of the forces which routed Reno had left after he consolidated his position on top of the bluffs; the Indians then diverted their attention to Custer's men.²³ Exactly how many warriors Custer had to contend with will never be known nor will the

actions of him and his men during the final minutes of their lives, for the only thing that survived what would become known as ‘Custer’s Last Stand’, would be a horse owned by Captain Keogh, named “Comanche”.²⁴ It is also unlikely that Custer, even after glimpsing a portion of the village from the bluffs above and seeing Reno’s attack, ever really fathomed the magnitude of the force arrayed against him. It is widely believed that no less than 2000 warriors opposed Custer’s overall command of 650. No doubt that same number is at least how many he had to contend with during his own last stand. Regardless, three to one odds can be overcome with an element of surprise and aggression. Unfortunately for him, he had achieved the former but Major Reno did not possess the latter.

Despite an abundance of detractors determined to claim that Custer’s defeat at the Little Bighorn was a result of his own reckless ambition, there remains a wealth of information to the contrary. Custer had to contend with an elusive enemy which was notoriously difficult to engage when they were found. Had he waited for reinforcements from either Gibbon’s or Crook’s columns, despite the camp’s size, the highly mobile Indian village could have disappeared overnight. Aggressive battlefield tactics which proved highly successful in the Civil War and Battle of the Washita were relied on to bring victory. Unfortunately a determined and enraged enemy in unimaginable numbers confronted a split force of U.S. cavalry with inconsistent leadership. What’s even more unfortunate is that history was written by those who had probably more of a hand in Custer’s defeat than he did himself.

¹ Urwin, *Custer Victorious*, 47.

² Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 38.

³ Custer, *My Life on the Plains*, xvi.

⁴ Urwin, *Custer Victorious*, 66.

⁵ Donovan, *A Terrible Glory*, 110.

⁶ Urwin, *Custer Victorious*, 14.

⁷ *Ibid*, 70.

⁸ Urwin, *Custer Victorious*, 73.

⁹ Elliot, *Custerology*, 72

¹⁰ Hunt, *I Fought with Custer*, 151.

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- ¹¹ Panzeri, *Little Bighorn 1876*, 39.
¹² Ibid, 41.
¹³ Hunt, *I Fought with Custer*, 154, 155.
¹⁴ Custer, *My Life on the Plains*, 186.
¹⁵ Ibid, 184.
¹⁶ Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, 191.
¹⁷ Panzeri, *Little Bighorn 1876*, 49.
¹⁸ Ibid, 50.
¹⁹ Ibid, 71.
²⁰ Ibid, 52.
²¹ Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, 9.
²² Ibid, 7.
²³ Stewart, *Custer's Luck*, 450.
²⁴ Ibid, 473.

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